

Countries of Particular Concern - Sudan

Religious conflict has been a major factor in Sudan's ongoing civil war, which began in 1983. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has identified Sudan as the world's most violent abuser of the right to freedom of religion and belief. The Commission has stated that the Sudanese government has committed genocidal atrocities against civilian populations in the South and in the Nuba Mountains. In the Sudan Peace Act of 2002, Congress found that the Sudanese government has committed acts of genocide.

Current and previous governments in Khartoum have attempted forcibly to convert non-Muslims to Islam and to impose Sharia law on Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Opposition to these coercive policies has fueled support for armed resistance by non-Muslim and non-Arab populations in the South, the Nuba Mountains region, and elsewhere. The current regime in particular has used appeals to Islam, including calls by senior government officials for "jihad," to mobilize northern Muslim opinion in support of the war effort. Religious prejudice, incited by government officials, contributes to the horrific human rights abuses perpetrated by government security forces and government-backed militias.

In the context of the civil war, which has resulted in two million deaths, predominantly of non-Muslims, government and allied forces have committed egregious human rights abuses, such as forced starvation as a result of the denial of international humanitarian assistance; abduction and enslavement of women and children; the forcible displacement of civilian populations (e.g., from oil-producing regions); and aerial bombardment of civilians, church property, and humanitarian facilities. Sites bombed have included clearly identifiable hospitals, schools, churches, markets, and relief organization compounds. Many of these abuses appear to have been the result of deliberate government policies. The need for accountability for these crimes is not diminished by progress in the Sudan peace process, encouraged by the United States and other interested parties.

In early 2004, the Government of Sudan and the major rebel group, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army, appeared close to a comprehensive peace agreement. In the past, however, commitments have been violated, however, by the government in Khartoum. Close U.S. monitoring of compliance, and sanctions for non-compliance, will be necessary to ensure a just and lasting peace.

The government of Sudan severely and systematically violates the religious freedom of Christians and followers of traditional African religions, as well as of Muslims who are associated with opposition groups or who dissent from the government's interpretation of Islam. Proselytizing of non-Muslims by Muslims is allowed in

government-controlled areas, but public religious expression and persuasion of Muslims by non-Muslims is forbidden. Conversion from Islam is regarded as apostasy, a crime punishable by death. In practice, suspected converts are subjected to intense scrutiny, intimidation, and even torture by government security personnel.

Religious groups must be registered by the government to operate legally. Unregistered groups cannot build places of worship or meet in public. Approval can be difficult to obtain, and even registered groups face difficulties. Although permits are routinely granted to build mosques, permission to build churches is routinely denied. For over 30 years, the government has denied permission to construct Roman Catholic churches in areas under its control.

Some children from non-Muslim families captured and sold into slavery by pro-government militias reportedly have been forced to convert to Islam. There are similar reports of coerced conversion in government-controlled camps for internally displaced persons, as well as among prison inmates, Popular Defense Force trainees, and children in camps for vagrant minors. The government has also allegedly tolerated the use of humanitarian assistance to induce conversion to Islam. In government-controlled areas, children who have been abandoned or whose parentage is unknown are considered by the government to be Muslims and may not be adopted by non-Muslims.

The Commission has made a series of recommendations regarding U.S. policy toward Sudan, including that the U.S. government appoint a national prominent individual to bring about a peaceful and just settlement of the war in Sudan. In September 2001, President Bush appointed former Senator John Danforth as Special Envoy for Peace in Sudan, energizing the Sudan peace process.

With regard to Sudan, the Commission has recommended that the U.S. government should:

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oppose the application of Sharia law to non-Muslims wherever they may reside in the country; insist that national institutions such as the military, law enforcement, and the highest level of the judiciary be secular institutions;

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urge the government of Sudan to (a) allow all religious groups to conduct

their activities freely; (b) ensure that all religious groups are free to build, repair, and operate houses of worship and social service ministries without delay or harassment; and (c) repeal any laws that punish changing one's faith or encouraging another to do so;

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prevail
upon the government of Sudan to provide needed humanitarian access to international relief organizations and increase U.S. humanitarian assistance delivered outside the Operation Lifeline Sudan system;

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quickly
disperse funding for humanitarian purposes, to build civil society, and to promote economic development in southern Sudan;

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hold
the government of Sudan accountable for significant violations of agreements it has made with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army;

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continue to keep in place existing sanctions on Sudan and refrain from upgrading diplomatic relations;

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build
upon the work of the International Eminent Persons Group to combat and end the terrible practice of abduction and enslavement by government-sponsored militias; and

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work to increase human rights and media reporting on abuses in Sudan and promote grassroots reconciliation among Sudanese.

